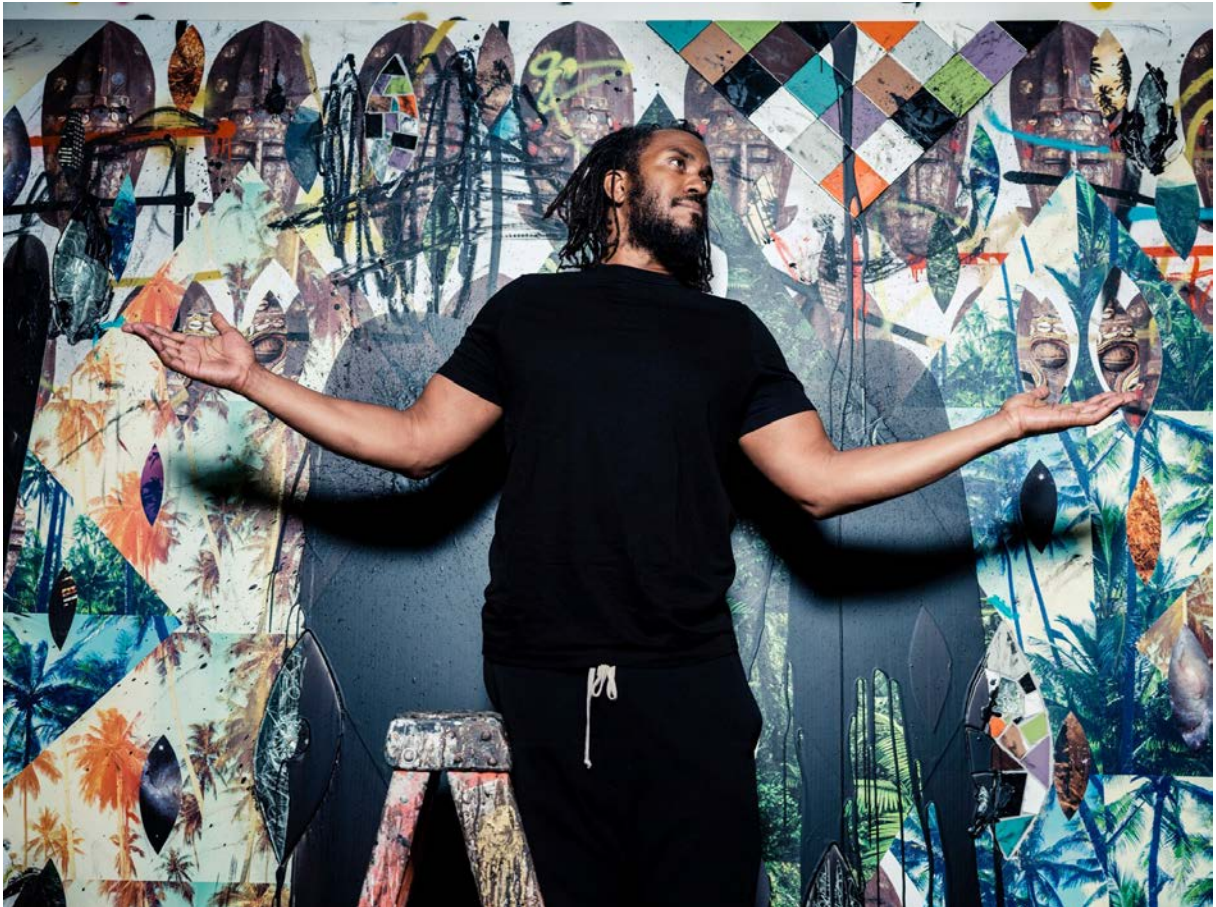


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A vital voice of his generation

Rashid Johnson is blowing open the idea of Africanness

By Sebastian Smee | July 3, 2019



Artist Rashid Johnson, 42, in front of one of his works in his Brooklyn studio. (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

BROOKLYN — It's raining heavily when I emerge from the subway at Grand Street in Brooklyn, so for \$2.50 I buy a black umbrella from a Chinese thrift store. I'm already damp, but the umbrella gets me in a presentable state the two or three blocks — past the Grand Street Campus High School and a parking lot full of police cars — to the studio of Rashid Johnson.

Tall and well-built, Johnson is moving around the sprawling, street-level space with the help of a Knee-Rover — a scooter with a padded platform for his knee. He broke a bone in his foot fooling around on a soccer pitch with his 7-year-old son, and the recovery has taken months. Johnson's work is intensely physical so the whole thing has been a "nightmare" — but he says it rolling his eyes and with a self-mocking smile.

The studio is busy. Several assistants are moving things around. The space is filled with wooden crates, tall shelves, mixed-media paintings made with black soap and wax stacked against walls, trestle tables



Johnson uses unusual materials in his works, such as shea butter, plants and black soap. (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

covered in pots, a massive collage, and blocks of blue Styrofoam carved by a chain saw into rough heads. A 19-year-old tabby cat sits on a table at the center of it all, supremely indifferent.

Johnson, 42, has two museum shows opening in July — one in Aspen, the other in Mexico City. He came to prominence in 2001 when curator Thelma Golden included him in “Freestyle,” a hugely influential group show at the Studio Museum in Harlem. He was just 24.

Since then, Johnson’s agitated, inquisitive and increasingly commanding work in photography, film, mixed media and sculpture — all of it teasing out the complexities, absurdities and psychology of black cultural identity — has made him a vital voice of his generation. He is known for works that incorporate shea butter — deriving from Africa, where it is used as a cosmetic and lotion and in some places has sacred associations — as well as black soap, plants, books and photographs, among other materials. His directorial debut, “Native Son,” premiered on HBO earlier this year.

Johnson is married to the artist Sheree Hovsepian, whose studio is a block away. He has been in this studio for seven years, in the area for 15. His daily routine, he says, is simple.

“Usually — when my foot’s not broken! — it starts off with trying to do something physical, like going to the gym or running or lifting weights.” He drives to the studio from Manhattan with his studio manager, and during the 20-minute ride she goes over logistics. Then he works.



Some of Johnson's artwork in his studio, which is filled with wooden crates, tall shelves, mixed-media paintings and more. (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

Johnson began making art as a photographer in 1996. He was just 19, and had years of study — at Chicago's Columbia College and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago — ahead of him.

When he was 23, just starting at SAIC — and in a dismal frame of mind — a friend invited him to Chicago's Red Square bathhouse. He walked into the dungeonlike steam room, and there, sitting naked, was activist and politician Jesse Jackson.

They got chatting, and Johnson fell in love with the place. He would return with copies of the French post-structuralist philosophers he was reading for school, and listen to the conversations of Armenian and Mexican businessmen, communists, judges — and Jesse Jackson. And the steam-room tiles he spent so many hours staring at became a leitmotif in his work.

Both museum shows — at the Aspen Art Museum and the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City — will feature a seven-minute film Johnson recently made, "The Hikers."

"It is about two younger black men who are hiking, one ascending the mountain on a hike at Aspen and the other descending," Johnson says. "I collaborated with a choreographer. We worked together to figure out a set of movements that borrow from ballet and from what I describe as 'anxious movements.' I was asking, 'What are the movements like when a black man is walking past a police officer? Or when a black man is suffering from agoraphobia?'"



Some of Johnson's sculptures. (Chris Sorensen/For The Washington Post)

"So these two black characters run into each other and there's just something beautiful about it. This has happened to me. I'll be traveling somewhere where there's less of an expectation that I will run into someone who looks like me. And when I do see that person there's almost like this platonic love. It's so unexpected! It's like, 'Oh, my God. It's you. What are you doing here?' It's this little fireworks moment."

"The Hikers" represents a new stage in Johnson's increasingly supple take on race — race as a function of emotion and inner life as much as politics and injustice.

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Q: You work with some unusual materials. How do you get these vast quantities of shea butter?

A: The shea butter we get through a group called Africa Imports. They distribute African products in African American communities. They're very aware that they're disseminating signifiers — products they believe would signal things about African identity to people in African American communities.

Q: Is that what you're doing, too? Do you think of your art in those terms?

A: I do, I do! They're doing it wholesale, I'm using art as a distribution system. It's about what the materials and signifiers say. What they add and what they question. When shea butter takes that Middle Passage journey to a place like Harlem or Brooklyn or the South Side of Chicago, what does it then become? In which ways does it assimilate? In which ways does it allow people to feel like they have a relationship with Africanness?

Q: Do you feel you personally have that relationship?

A: My mother is an African history professor, my stepfather is Nigerian, I grew up with a Nigerian family, we traveled in Africa. So I grew up with a really informed African identity. Unimpeachable. But at times, my mother's academic background and my stepfather's actual Africanness and that whole side of my family made me feel less African.

Q: Why, do you think?

A: I think I became aware of how Afri-



A collection of spray paint in his studio. (Chris Sorensen/For The Washington Post)



Johnson has been in this Brooklyn studio for seven years. His wife's studio is a block away. (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

can American I was. It's not totally dissimilar to someone who's been generationally from New York of Italian descent and they go to Sicily and they don't speak the language. Even the food is different. I think many descendants of Africa want to have a close relationship with the continent of Africa, and I think that's possible. But in other ways you become very aware of how Western you are. So a lot of the signifiers and materials I work with speak to that global distress. How we pull at it, how we frame it, and how, when you try your best, not unlike shea butter, it becomes quite slippery and you can't hold on to it.

Q: Your wife was born in Iran. Has your marriage to her fed into your sense of the complexity of this stuff?

A: Absolutely. My wife's family is Muslim. She wasn't raised as a Muslim necessarily. Only recently she asked me, "But am I Muslim?" [Laughs]. I said, "I think so." So that's another thing that's quite difficult to pin down: our relationship to religion when we aren't practicing. Is it cultural? How do you define it? We're constantly trying to get to the essence of ourselves. But there is no more essence to get to. It's all of those creolized and miscegenated bits that are making you what you are. There is no way to make it more pure. So my work is partly about the absurdity of the things that marry us to cultural identity. And yet emotionally these things do attach us. If you feel like these things are part of your story, they're part of your story. I began using these materials as a way to question the sincerity of their use, but it has evolved into an honest negotiation and appreciation of these materials and how they affect the poetry of my story.



Rashid Johnson: "My work is partly about the absurdity of the things that marry us to cultural identity." (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

Q: This is a big studio. How do you handle the logistics of preparing for two museum shows?

A: It's not as hard as you'd think. My parameters are: What am I physically capable of doing? I'm still living within the confines of what I can actually put my arms around. I'm responsible for all the mark-making in my studio. It's not a factory environment by any stretch of the imagination.

Q: Are there times of the day that you set aside for creative thinking?

A: That's all fluid. I only have about four hours a day in which I can physically engage with artworks in an effective way. It's strangely very low stress, making art. It's the only thing I've ever known how to do. And it's the only thing I've ever felt really good about. I wouldn't say confident. But good about. I know that I should be doing it.

Q: Where else is your head at with your work?

A: Recently? Emotions. For me, that's a more honest space to be in. It's almost like therapy. You tell the therapist what's going on and they say something like, "Well, how does it make you feel?" So I'm taking it all in. But it's hard for me to parse it out. It's not as if I've abandoned my intellectual concerns, because I haven't. But I think that I'm allowing them to commingle with my emotional concerns.